United Nations E/CN.6/2006/NGO/7

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
23 January 2006

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Fiftieth session
27 February-10 March 2006
Item 3 (c) (ii) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels

Statement submitted by Widows Rights International, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

* E/CN.6/2006/1.

06-21900 (E) 060206

Widows Rights International (WRI) was founded in 1996 and works with widows in ten countries in Asia and Africa. Working with women in proactive projects for widows gives WRI a unique understanding of the strengths of widows and their contributions to social cohesion, and post conflict regeneration in addition to their suffering as a result of discrimination.

The thematic issues at the 50th CSW will focus on the promotion of gender equality in development and in the decision making processes, but they do not encompass the specificity of the situation which **WIDOWHOOD** uniquely imposes on women in many countries in the developing world.

Ten years after Beijing, the plight of widows worldwide is now being increasingly recognised, but more as victims of wars and the HIV- AIDS pandemic, rather than as victims of age-old discrimination. The Beijing Platform for Action and other human rights instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), are excellent tools for challenging the discrimination that women and girls suffer, and for providing an enabling environment to bring about gender equality and the advancement of women, but the very specific discrimination that only widows, whether young or old, suffer are often ignored.

The numbers of widows worldwide are rising, as the human toll in conflict afflicted areas continues to increase. The UN has detailed the effect that conflicts – particularly those within states –have on women and children. In his 2002 report to the Security Council : Women Peace and Security, the Secretary General stated that, where cultures of violence and discrimination against women exist prior to conflict, they will be exacerbated during conflict. He added that women and children are disproportionately targeted in contemporary armed conflicts and constitute the majority of all victims. What remained unsaid however was the fact that as a result of such targeting, widows now constitute a disproportionate percentage of these victims of conflict.

The rise in the numbers of conflicts around the world, and the HIV-Aids epidemic, have greatly increased the numbers of widows, including many who are young and the mothers of young children. In addition, the customary treatment of widows in many countries includes common abuse and denies widows the opportunity to contribute to the social and economic development of their families and communities.

Despite efforts at the international level to raise awareness of the issues facing widows, the situation at the national level in many countries continues to condone many customs surrounding widowhood, most of which are psychologically harmful and life-threatening. These deep-rooted customs, include mourning and burial rites, lack of rights to inheritance, land ownership, and custody of children, forced remarriage to close kin of their dead spouses, or a prohibition on remarrying at all.

There is also compelling evidence from many countries that the majority of widows are forced to lead lives of extreme poverty and marginalization, often exposed to abuse and the economic exploitation of their families. Even when laws exist to prevent the abuse of widows, ignorance of the law or cultural habits, impede access to or implementation of legal remedies.

Widows Rights International , a non-governmental organization based in London, is now concentrating its efforts to support national groups working in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, to change attitudes, policies, and laws at local level as well as to enable them to form national and regional networks to bring about change.

It has now become very clear that in order to make a strong case for widows rights as against women's human rights more detailed information is needed on the numbers, ages, and the practices which lead so many of them into lives of unrelieved misery. These practices impact on the following generation as their children are withdrawn from schools, and forced into dangerous life-threatening livelihood options, such as prostitution and beggary.

WRI continues to develop a network of researchers on these matters and we call on States Parties and civil society to collaborate in order to provide data on widows and their children. Hitherto policy makers at the national level have proved unwilling to introduce measures in support of change without reliable qualitative and quantitative data and we call on States Parties to introduce or implement legislation to provide such data.

WRI also calls on all States Parties, the Commonwealth, NGOs, and UN agencies , to use this forum which the Commission on the Status of Women provides, to acknowledge that the human rights of widows is an integral but specific aspect of women's rights generally . WRI supports the campaigns being waged by many NGOs to eradicate this gross infringement of the human rights of a particular section of the world's population, in order to enable them to play a role in the development of their societies and their countries. In addition WRI will continue its own campaigns in this field.

We invite this Commission on the Status of Women in its fiftieth session to give priority to the compilation of reliable data on the customs which infringe the human rights of widows, and of statistics on the numbers of widows worldwide. We also urge the Commission that it should include the link between the poverty of children and the lack of widows' human rights as one of the themes for the following quinquennium.